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## Alexia: Antigone Kefala's overdue fairytale

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine the way in which Antigone Kefala constructs her story to become an author. She narrates her experience in her book *Alexia* (Antigone Kefala's persona) in a fairytale manner. In the book we learn that Alexia spent some of the most important years of her young life in New Zealand, as a migrant. The most important part of this experience is based on her difficulty to come to terms with, and learn, a new language (English). What begins by being a traumatic experience for Alexia, later evolves into a creative force that guides her decision to become an author. In that way the English language becomes the most powerful, the most creative and the most productive tool in her life.

In order to challenge Alexia's process of becoming an author, her experience is compared to that of two famous French authors, Aragon and Sartre, who also decided to become authors in their childhood years. There was an obvious parallel between the French authors' experiences through their first language, which corresponded in an astonishing way to Alexia's. Therefore, no matter whether one wishes to express oneself in one's mother tongue or a foreign language, the process of becoming an author is always to consider a language as an unknown field of strange sounds, musicality and scattered grains of meanings.

Antigone Kefala's *Alexia: a tale for advanced children* is a small book in the form and tradition of the fairy tale. It narrates the story of a Greek family that lived on "a big island in the Pacific" as "refugees". This simple story contains explicit aspects from the real life experience of the author and the book's plot incorporates actual elements from the real life of Antigone Kefala. A childhood crisis can often trigger off the beginnings of the authorial journey. This crisis, which accompanies the person throughout her years, becomes so intense at a specified moment in the author's mature life that it forces her to return to those experiences associated with the initial crisis, to re-examine events, to see them from a new perspective, and to shed light on some of them, whilst other feelings still remain elusive. This reflective stage is a necessary one for the continuation of an author's creative process.

The above-mentioned phenomena lead to the question that needs to be addressed, which is the relationship of a specific individual with the outside world and how this relationship is verbalised; something which leads us to examine the relationship between language and life. When this relationship has distilled, that is, when all things are identified and given a voice, then we can witness the birth of a poet or indeed a writer. This primal process of naming the world around us is not unique to writers.

Some other reasons must exist which force some individuals to think about this process at length, which in turn is transformed into a form of aestheticism, a vital axis of their own existence. Everything commences and concludes in the semantic relationship between language and the world. We could indeed claim that it is language itself that must assume the primary importance of the two. In this way, we can witness how this process is reversed in the respective case of poets and writers. Initially, one experiences the world before one realises the importance of language but during the creative process this is reversed. This constitutes the pivotal moment of transformation from the experiences of everyday life to the literary field. Before going further one should observe that this is not a scientific conclusion, nor should we involve ourselves with the phenomenon of linguistic cratylism. We are merely appraising the choices that some individuals have made, whether consciously or unconsciously, in writing and in speaking somewhat differently from others.

For Antigone Kefala, her main experience is ultimately a limited one and it is the language itself that holds centre stage, as it becomes evident at the end of her 'fairy tale'. It is the ending itself that changes the tone of her narrative mode as something more specific, more certain and more objective. It is there, in this theoretical accretion that the atmosphere of the poetical reminiscences and childhood longings is terminated somewhat abruptly. As shown in the book, this is the moment when Alexia enrolls at university, the end of adolescence when she has reflected on all that is important in her life and decides to concentrate primarily on language. It is this language that manifests itself in this ultimate moment that supersedes the meaning of even a God. It is at university that she looks around her, establishing that:

It had no Great Hall, and no Quadrangle with a Tree to help prove the existence of God. But Alexia was sure that one could prove the existence of God without this Tree or a Quadrangle. Language, she felt, was more potent, inventive and durable than people imagined, and produced daily miracles that no one noticed any longer and everyone took for granted. (Kefala 1995: 108)

This is the ultimate decision taken by Alexia, and in turn by Antigone Kefala, that leads her in the realm of literature, to those miracles that only "language can reveal", not accessible and decipherable to people in daily life.

It would now be beneficial to examine the ways in which the writer constructs the crisis between language and life, its beginnings and its significant stages, before it transforms itself into a work of literature. This crisis is located in the conflict between the young Alexia and the strange world around her, living, as she does, as a refugee with her family. Therefore, this crisis is essentially a cultural and more particularly a linguistic one (the young Alexia does not speak English, which is the language of this island) and remains so until the protagonist takes the decision to deify this unknown language. In relation to this socio-cultural factor, we should stress that it is within this context that Alexia's story takes place, at a time when in Australia these types of experiences have greater currency, since they respond to the more general issue of multicultural writing. It is in this cultural climate that the writer seemingly narrates her own experience of the clash between two cultural entities. I have used the modifier 'seemingly' because later on I will try to prove that, despite the fact that Kefala's writing can be seen from within the multicultural experience context, some other, more conventional literary techniques operate within her work. It is not a matter of coincidence that, when the book was first released in 1984, when discussions about multiculturalism were at their peak, the full

title of the book was: *Alexia: a tale of two cultures*.<sup>1</sup> In this newer bilingual edition the title is changed and the word 'culture' is omitted. We are not aware why the author chose to do this. However, following the train of thought above, we can assume that Antigone Kefala is trying to distance herself from the oppressive world of literary fashion and currency that presupposes the production and consumption of popular culture texts.

She perceives the potential danger of entrapping herself, as well as her writing, in this easy road, this literary context which has become cliché, and chooses instead the world of literature, whether with a small or capital 'l'. This appears to be her more mature conscious decision as the tomes pertaining to multiculturalism increase. When asked if she was conscious of her Greekness in writing she replied: "My themes are Greek, but one does not actually write as <something>, but rather as an individual who has certain concerns and preoccupations. One does not think of nationality. If you do it consciously, it will probably not work". (Nickas 1992: 225) The choices that Kefala makes are dependent on issues dealing with intra literary phenomena, which relate to the idiosyncratic usage of the language itself and are not so dependent on direct issues of ethnic origin or culture. The author starts to write in English at an advanced age, having traversed the Romanian, Greek and French languages. Her family, living as they did in an urban pre-war Romanian environment, enjoyed all the typical trappings of its class: comfort, French culture, music, books and so forth. The author, when trying to explain her choice of the English language as her means of literary expression states:

I changed too many languages to be capable to write in any other. I was only twelve when I left Romania. When I went to Greece I had to learn a new language. I never wrote in Greek because I was still learning it when I left. Then we came here (to New Zealand), so I began to write late, in my third year at University. The only language which I knew as an adult, was English... (Nickas 1992: 226)

Despite this, the way she utilises the English language is unique. Evidently the French language of her pre-school years had played a significant role in the formulation and perception of the English language, as the author herself states: "English has other intrinsic evaluations from French, so that made for a language which was quite un-English, I mean it's still un-English". (Nickas 1992: 227) This journalistic confession is also applicable in her autobiographical endeavour that is *Alexia*. This world, then, is dictated not only by the limited experience of the linguistic correspondence between things and words, but also by the unexpected subsequent naming of these things, and naturally enough, the subsequent articulation of the world itself.

Let us now examine more analytically this initial and essentially linguistic experience, as it is described in *Alexia*. We could claim that three significant stages can be discerned in Alexia's cycle of experiences before she becomes a writer. The first stage concerns itself with her childhood experiences up until the moment that the family decides to flee Romania, becoming refugees in the process. Alexia, in recalling deserting her birthplace (which she refers to as the Old Country) in the time of war, remembers how few material possessions the family took with them, preferring to carry the musical instruments, which are vividly described as living things. This can be related to echoes and motifs (not exclusively musical) that can be found in her work, as we are to discover shortly. She recalls the immense pity with which they abandoned their family library. This departure signifies the end of one world and the beginning of another. This occurs, if we are to accept the author's own biographical details, at approximately

the age of twelve. Up until this stage, the author explicitly states, everything existed in a state of harmony, even the relationship between language and the world at large, or could this have been a mere human perception?

In winter they went to the office or to school, they played instruments, visited each other, went to the theatre or read books. And in summer, they went for swims in the river or the lake, they stayed in the sun under umbrellas, eating black cherry confiture, sherbet, and drinking cool water, strolled in the gardens among the statues of cupids and they watched the moon rise above the water. And so the seasons went. (Kefala 1995: 46)

People carried this perception deep within them, even in the most difficult moments during the journey that would take them to foreign shores:

Everyone went promenading around the decks pretending that they were still in the Old Country, discussing how marvellously they had felt there, in spring or in autumn, in summer or in winter, how real the bread had been, and how good the water, the dishes they used to have... vine leaf balls with yoghurt, tripe soup, eggplant salads, stuffed capsicums and so on... (Kefala 1995: 36)

The tone is certainly an ironic one, but Alexia herself sheds no other light on the way she lived her life in the Old Country in relation to the outside world. She will omit to tell us how she was growing up, about her adversarial position to life generally, which is a significant factor in every child's life, as if the protective environment in which she lived had left her unscathed by similar "crises". The second stage concerns itself with the 'migrant' experience, when the relationship between language and the world is beginning to strain. This is located in a number of phases. Firstly, we experience the difference in the way we perceive certain ideas and notions. The notion of work, when the father is forced to work as a manual labourer (which we assume he did not experience in Romania) changes completely and becomes more specific:

Now Alexia knew the idea of Work from the Old Country, but there people talked about it in Latin, or Ancient Greek, and printed old sayings about it in fine script which they placed under glass on the walls at school, usually high so that no one else was able to read them, and everyone went about their business in the normal way. (Kefala 1995: 46)

Secondly, we witness the phenomenon of the weakening association between words and names: "Father would return from work and he couldn't quite comprehend what his supervisor meant exactly when he used to tell him that he would 'fire him', when he used to leave five minutes early from work". His brother had a similar experience because everyone called him Bill and he, "being very fastidious, said he owed nothing to anyone and could not understand why they were calling him 'Bill'". All these 'misunderstandings' reach their crescendo when Alexia herself is at school and she tries to learn English and to make connections between the new words and what she knows of the world:

She tried to imagine the two verbs as Miss Prudence had first pointed them out - a tall man with a small hat, and a short woman with a flamed skirt and a handbag, forever entering or leaving houses and underneath them the legend: He is going, She is going, / He is coming, She is coming. (Kefala 1995: 86)

Alexia tries to grow up through such experiences and to "fill" her world with new words; a world that remains, nonetheless, an empty one. This emptiness is felt more deeply by the young Alexia as she becomes more conscious of the chaos between words and the tangible world of experience. Her mother contributes to this sense of emptiness (the mother is described by the author as "incredibly saddened") because, among other

things, she has lost access to the make-believe world of her library, where she (“beautiful young and timid”) could lose herself for hours in reading novels, “Russian and French, Italian and Spanish, Greek and Romanian, English and American, Scandinavian and Finnish, Hungarian and Bulgarian”. Now the mother is prone to sighing a great deal when talking to her daughter at length about all these books as well as the sadness of life saying “La Vie n’est pas un Roman”. (Kefala 1995: 50)

The mother’s plethoric reading experience is suddenly conveyed to her daughter in negative terms in New Zealand (which is referred to as ‘The endless nothingness’) as she points out to Alexia that there is a distinction between life and art. In other words, there is no correlation between the experience of words and the experience of living. This ‘void’ is needed by the young Alexia as a means of support when she later reaches the decision to become an author. It is with this intention that she now begins to view the world around her. She even finds the landscape of the island (New Zealand), which is so lively and bountiful, somewhat ‘stunted’: “The eerie silence was like the one she remembered after the sirens had stopped and before the planes had arrived”. (Kefala 1995: 66)

This is where one can locate her predilection for finding the world around her a silent one, as was explained to her by her friend Vasia: “Everyone on the island had been forced to swear an Oath of Silence, and to speak only when absolutely forced”. (Kefala 1995: 68) It did not take the young Alexia much time at all to connect these with the world of sound. She understood that in order to comprehend this new language she would have to learn to ‘read’ its sounds, as one would in music. But how could this take place on the island of the ‘resonance eaters’, as her brother, Nicholas was fond of proclaiming? Her brother had lost all interest in sound and music whilst on the island. And it was not only a matter of sounds, it was also a question of time as well, her brother would add. He was adamant that the people around them were only interested in “being relaxed”. This incident points out the lack of a cultural and creative environment in the island’s social sphere, which would have been preferable to both Nicholas and Alexia. This tendency also deprived the young girl of the opportunity to indulge in the world of make-believe. It was as in Grandmother Asimina’s story about ‘The Man who Died Forgetting how to Breathe’, a story she liked very much and used to tell often. Alexia felt that Grandmother Asimina would have known how to deal with this question of Time. (Kefala 1995: 76) The reference to the grandmother’s ability to narrate folk tales prompts us to think at once of the author’s ample ability to narrate her own “fairy tale”.

This leads us, then, to the third stage of Alexia’s experience, which deals with the world of myth-making/make-believe. This is not evident exclusively at the end of the work, when the author decides to dedicate herself to the admirable world of language, which is “more potent, inventive and durable than people imagined”, but is shown throughout many poignant moments in the tale as well as during the narration of young Alexia’s “folk-tale”. In fact, it could not be otherwise, since what we encounter in the text is the appraisal of a crucial, unique childhood experience that is forever overflowing from the final choices of the mature author. However much as one tries to narrate a painless thought-provoking story through the eyes of a child, the experiences and perspective of the adult narrator inevitably intervene, driving the story to another subsequent realm that is often a “theoretical” one. This timeless relationship (time past and time future are held together in time present) also underpins the “natural” construction of the narrative. This could be used to explain the things omitted from the narration, the ellipses, the succinctness and occasional terseness of the language, which at times transforms the

form of the text from one to another. The majority of the text is in the continuous past tense (was entering, was listening, was admiring, was understanding, etc) but occasionally some insight of the protagonist suddenly dictates a change of tense and the telling employs the simple past (I went, he said, etc), which is a more specific tense. For example, “Alexia went out. From the steep garden one could see the bush and the bus stop, people coming from work, the women carrying heavy shopping bags”. (Kefala 1995: 74) When such changes in tense occur throughout the book, it is as if we momentarily enter into a “concrete” fictional story and the identity of a particular hero is finally established.

But of course it is a fictional deviation. There are many other deviations where the narration becomes more “artificial”, particularly when the narrator faces an existing problem or dilemma of some significance. For example, to highlight the difference between the foreigners and the locals in New Zealand, the narrator resorts to an inventive story dealing with teeth, which deflects from the problem at hand: “They renounced their teeth, as a sign of maturity (...) and they replaced them with false teeth (...). And waxed them a little when they wanted to appear friendly. This was how they recognised foreigners. One of the earlier greetings was: ‘Are they your teeth?’”. (Kefala 1995: 56) Such rare techniques, dispersed throughout the text, demonstrate a subconscious tendency on behalf of the author to espouse the world of make-believe. Even towards the end of the book, when Alexia finally begins to somewhat sort out the world around her, words and phrases become a kind of word-play, a type of short poetry. When hearing the word milk-bar, Alexia would then think of a Bar of milk and “imagined the name in a translucent incandescent whiteness”. (Kefala 1995: 90)

Such realisation and projections constitute a rite of passage for Alexia; they signal the process of maturity and realisation that language is a “magnificent and huge edifice built by the continuous efforts of successive generations”. Language is an accretion, a type of distillation which is there to serve people, “to remind them Who They Are, to allow them to develop and to help them find themselves”. (Kefala 1995: 106) Everything concludes, then, with the apotheosis of language that is naturally stronger for the person who has decided to serve it, evoking its “musical” capabilities and discovering some of its poetic tendencies.

This dedication is not simply a decisive one for Antigone Kefala, one that she will observe throughout her life, but a common experience for nearly all writers. Without wanting to resort to the most simplistic form of comparison, let us examine two important examples of writers who have tried to explain what it was that made them become involved with the art of the word, the logos.

The first of these was Louis Aragon. In his book, *Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire ou les incipit*, (Aragon 1969) he attempts to narrate the manner in which his many texts were inspired and discuss the first word or phrase with which he commenced each of his books. *Incipit* is a Latin word literally meaning: here it commences. What has played a significant part in the development of Aragon's authorial personality is the accretion of his early childhood experiences. This is the basis of this relevant book. The manner in which Aragon remembers the first of these ‘troubling’ memories can be instructive for other readers. The first of these insights can be located at around the age of five. Aragon can read at this age. He can, for example, recognise the French word for lion. When provided with a pencil and pressed to write this word he is adamant in his refusal: “Why



should I write it since I can recognise it?”, states the author. (Aragon 1969: 9) Naturally everybody around him despaired, believing that the young Louis would never learn to write. It is then that a new experience, a kind of game, begins for the author. He poses different questions to himself and he sets about finding the most difficult and strange answers. It is through this first experience that he begins to feel different from those around him and becomes aware that he is capable of creating his own world, which for him is a kind of pleasant isolation.

The next step is to try and see to what extent the grown-ups close to him can respond to his devilish experiments. The first of these victims are his eldest aunts. He dictates different phrases to them and they, in turn, take down this dictation as instructed. Aragon claims: “They couldn’t see past the end of my tongue”. It does not occur to these grown-ups to change the phrases dictated to them to imbue them with something of their own experience and understanding as young Louis would have done. Naturally enough, the adults, and particularly the numerous aunts, are duly dismissed for having failed this test. During the next stage of his experimentation, in which he tries to write down whole slabs of texts and paragraphs, he is forced to learn to write so that he can copy down his form of lies, or to put it another way, so that he can indulge in his game of secrets (“je jouais aux secrets”). However, according to the author, it was not simply a case of trying to convey (“fixer”) his secrets but to provoke (“susciter, provoquer”) new secrets so that he could write.

This is seemingly a rendition of reality, something which, in the process of being re-written, becomes a form of falsity. Even in its first version, however, this remains a sort of enigma even for the writer. Aragon claims: “I do calculations solely to observe the numbers jump all over the paper in an unexpected meaningless fashion and after that I can dream”. (Aragon 1969: 13) And finally he reaches this valuable realisation which shows his preference for the written word over the thinking process; in other words, the written word against the world itself. He categorically states that “our thoughts emanate from the process of writing and not the other way around”. These are the kind of processes that pushed Aragon into becoming an author.

The second comparison is with Sartre who experienced something similar to Aragon. He states: “Every person possesses a natural position, it is not pride nor values that determine one’s outcome: this is decided by one’s childhood experience”. (Sartre 1964: 47) In his book *Les Mots* (the title of which is self-explanatory) he attempts to narrate the childhood experiences that have led him to the field of ideas and literature. For Sartre, the authorial journey can be traced back to the urban family environment, dominated as it was by the family library, where “books would speak”. This is also a common experience for both Aragon and Antigone Kefala. For Sartre, however, having lost his father at an early age, this beginning takes on a particular light through the imposing figures of his grandfather and his mother, Anne-Marie, who will play an even more significant role in his life; a direct parallel with the role Proust’s mother played in the latter’s life.

Much to his delight, the young Sartre is quickly left alone to discover the world of fairy tales and of mythical heroes. In no time at all the ideas, the many fantastical scenarios, become more real than reality and material possessions because, as the author himself claims, it is something that takes first place in one’s life, something that precedes the world. He considers this as his most Platonic hour:

I found ideas more real than things, because they were the first to give themselves to me and because they gave themselves like things. I have encountered the world through books: assimilated, ordered, labelled and studied, but still impressive; and I had confused the random experiences found in books with accidental turn of real events. This is what is responsible for this idealism that I had struggled to get rid of for thirty years. (Sartre 1964: 39)

It would be pointless, in this context, to discuss to what extent Sartre managed to rid himself of this idealism, if at all. What is important here, and this is also reflected in the work of Aragon, is the rendition and the duplication of the real from the illusory and the fantastical that precedes it in this relationship which is timeless (incorporating the past and the future). Following this, Sartre will experience the immense happiness of inventing his own things and his own reality because he can discover names for them. He claims to be living on the planet Mars, where “the world played at my feet and everything humbly pleaded to be named by me, a process by which I was simultaneously creating something by naming it and also taking it. Without this fundamental illusion I would never have been able to write”. (Sartre 1964: 47) Many similar experiences will occur for the young Sartre where he identifies and empathises with the heroes he encounters in books seemingly living in between two worlds: “I thought I had two voices, one of which would dictate to the other and was independent of my will.” He concludes: “I decided that I existed in a double realm” (Sartre 1964: 181) and proceeds to inform his mother that “*It speaks within my head*” (“ça parle dans ma tête”). Fortunately, according to him, his mother chose to ignore such ravings.

This is Sartre’s vividly remembered experience regarding his beginnings as a writer, somewhere between the fifth and twelfth year of his life. All these incidents are accompanied by the sometimes traumatic experience of the actual writing which performs the function (as it does in Aragon’s life) of being able to render on paper this undeveloped voice (“tics de langage” according to Sartre) that precedes things and the world.

Following this brief comparative reference, it is time to return to *Alexia* for some final but not conclusive observations. The experiences of Alexia do not differ greatly from Aragon’s and Sartre’s experiences. What dictates the colour and the breath of all things and the world is the experience of language. Whether this linguistic experience is taking place in Paris, in Romania, in Greece or in New Zealand, it is of little consequence. The individual’s decision to apply himself/herself to the art of the word can be located in his/her need to name things in a personal and particular manner. The words themselves decide the mystery of such an experience, which becomes at times a clearly musical one and which is beyond the logical processes that normally follow. Alexia whispers such words, no matter how they terrify her initially, until she gives in to them and is connected with them. This relates to the painless passion that creates non-reversible circumstances: “If you have this kind of passion, you can make it work, equally. It’s the in-between, which doesn’t quite work”. (Nickas 1992: 230). This attitude can go some way in justifying Alexia’s decision not to connect at all with the external landscape of New Zealand and to consider it empty and devoid of any inspiration. She needs this negativity, this primal and uncompromising rejection, in order for the passion for language to become operable. Her landscapes from here on will be the written lines, the little-noticed boundaries and conventions of writing, the musicality of sentences, the ‘tics’ of the language as Sartre called them. Besides, nature and culture are two different



entities and any possible discussion of their differences would not contribute to our appreciation of Kefala's text.

Alexia gives in to this 'myopic' passion that constantly scrutinises language. It is primarily her naming hour. Words become almost independent, they distance themselves from the world. It is for this reason that many of these words are written with an initial upper case: Unbelievably Sad, Refugees, Musical instruments, Old Country, Town, School, Work, Father, Suite, Mother, Pyjamas, Patient Person, Noise Maker, Oath of Silence, etc. It is with this understanding that we can appreciate how some phrases come to signify so much for Alexia's childhood memory. She recalls isolated song lyrics that contain a kind of strange poetic quality: "I have a nice bunch of coconuts...", "You can only drink to my health with your eyes..." She stops and day dreams in front of actual places but also before their names: "Bonny Rock", "Palm Road", "Summer Fields", and some other places that were named by the indigenous people "that had an abrasive musicality about them".

She even recalls and notes some poetical labels that her mother attaches to the pyjamas she is working on at the factory: "Hedonist", "Quality Pyjamas", "Sleep Corner", "The Island". She is strongly confronted with the meaning of some words, not because they offer something special, but because she decides to 'liberate' them from their context, to hear them in another voice, to recreate them in her own way, like Sartre and Aragon have done, to bestow "more time" upon them. By being literally surrendered to time, the words assume a poetical function. She finally transfers them to the imagined library that was lost some time back in Romania but also to the library which is associated with the "Incredibly sad" Mother who has read so much. In this way, even phrases from some advertisement that she sees pasted on a wall assume the aestheticism of the make-believe world of a Maupassant:

And near the entrance, the entire wall held a panel showing a heroine out of a novel by Maupassant, that Mother talked about, in long frilly skirts and a buttoned-up bodice, small boots with a parasol, an elaborate hair style, with smiling eyes and a butterfly mouth, and above her head in large faded golden letters was the message: Drink Schweppes Aerated Waters. (Kefala 1995: 92)

Surely this is the finest moment of Kefala's book. In this way she recreates a bygone and delicate world that continues to remain longingly elusive in the attempt to be recalled in its entirety. Perhaps the responsibility to do this lies with the reader who must also initiate the final continuous montage that will bring the tale alive. The author herself assists greatly in this task by dictating the ideological context within which we must move to complete the scenario: "Once upon a time, south west of Pago Pago on an island called Te Kore Roa which in the language of the first inhabitants means 'The Wide Spread Nothing'...". Language full of music and time. Time, which Kefala will finally rediscover, is a quality which was only too familiar to her grandmother. It is time that will permit her to narrate but also provide her with the opportunity of becoming an author. To be able to tell stories, to narrate, you need time. You need expansive time to allow the words themselves to be replicated, even proving their own meaning false at times. This is the true beginning of myth-making and the world of make-believe.

The ideals of multiculturalism and feminism (themes so common and popular in the literary productions in Australia after the 1960s) are secondary ones in this work, and they serve a mere cosmetic function. In a similar vein to Sartre and Aragon, Kefala attempts to recall events that took place in the first five or ten years of her life back in Romania. She tries to populate this empty space of her childhood with the physical

world of New Zealand. Her first writings, then, are not to be found within the grammatical awkwardness of the English language but the distancing and finally the oppression of the certainties of her mother tongue. This is demonstrated directly a few times when the author refers to the world of her childhood, in which 'swam' the middle class of the time, although in the depth of this ocean of life there was a dormant volcano. Everything then must resurface and must be re-appraised, its potency re-ignited by language as if it were a fairy tale. Both Aragon and Sartre also began their authorial journey through fairy tales.

In the case of Kefala, however, the first language will remain distant until the end. It is through this, and another perspective perhaps, that we can begin to comprehend the figure of the 'Immensely Sad' mother, a figure approximating a sad and silent Madonna. The fairy tale will be heard but it will also be long overdue. Its world of make-believe and its narrative prowess as well as its consolatory function will be rendered finally in another language. This language is English, which is not considered by the author a language at all but a kind of anti-language capable of such immense make-believe as she herself maintains: "My approach to English is not quite an English approach. The type of imagery that I use, the kind of vocabulary that I use, the whole texture of my language is not English texture". (Nickas 1992: 227-228) In the case of Aragon and Sartre this rendition of the world of make-believe succeeds within the French language itself, by greatly fabricating it. Antigone Kefala could have done the same, through using the Greek language, but she preferred another way: one which for her was limited, intrusive but ultimately effective.

This is simultaneously both the deciding factor and the most crucial moment in the writing process. Antigone Kefala will never be able to rid herself of such a moment, and the same could be said for all poets and writers. The English language is a mere supposition, something akin to a fairy tale. The intensity and the passion of the 'lines' of words truly remind one of older imaginary and idealised landscapes; idealised to such an extent that we can no longer speak about them directly but must duplicate them through another voice, through another set of images. So we are not surprised at all when the young Alexia sees landscapes she remembers from her childhood, landscapes from the warring Balkans, right in front of her eyes in the middle of New Zealand: "this unearthly silence reminded her of another, when the sirens ceased and the planes were due to arrive". This transposition is self-evident but its duration is filled with a sense of limited intensity that leads us to assume that the text itself is concerned with this sense of a double life.

However, it is within this rich linguistic context that something subtle and minute occurs, perhaps a discordant nuance, a turn of phrase, not significant in itself but sufficient to enter the world of literature and art. Consider the following by Aragon: "For example, if I dictated to them [the aunts] that grandmother's small white scarf was lost this morning, it would never occur to these people to write down the *small red scarf* or the *big green scarf*." In a similar vein, Sartre writes from his early romances: "For the duration of an entire year I completed all my sentences, at least one in every ten, with the following phrase, spoken with ironic endurance: 'It matters not'. I would say: 'Here is a huge white dog. It is not white, it is grey, but it matters not'". (Sartre 1964: 181)

And why should it matter?

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## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> The John Ferguson edition was published in 1985.